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ABSTRACT

The findings of a research project undertaken by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) on student responsibility as it relates to job performance are reported. Forty high school students, 15 teachers, and 18 employers involved in Cooperative Work Experience and Experience-Based Career Education programs were interviewed. The students had been rated by their teachers as either high or low in responsibility. Separate sections of the report discuss findings on the meaning of responsibility as defined by students, teachers, and employers; perceptions of the importance and role of the home, the school, and the workplace in the development of responsibility; and correlations between teacher and student ratings of the students' responsibility. Discussed in the final two sections are points of agreement and disagreement among the students, teachers, and employers and implications for action which can be drawn from the study. (DC)

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# LEARNING RESPONSIBILITY:
# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HOME, SCHOOL AND WORKPLACE

Ideas for Action in Education and Work
Issue 6 November 1982

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

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# Learning Responsibility: The Importance of the Home, School and Workplace

Employers often claim that one of the chief causes of high job turnover among youth is their lack of a sense of responsibility. This perception can lead to youth not being hired or to their being fired after only a few months on the job.

New strategies for enhancing responsibility are needed by parents, educators and employers. Specifically, what role can the home, school and workplace play in providing opportunities for responsible behavior by youth?

## What the Research Shows

Recent studies have dealt with this question in a general way. In Ideas for Action No. 2, "Improving Learning in the Workplace," October, 1981, we reported results of a survey taken of more than 1,100 students enrolled in Experience-Based Career Education Programs in 16 states.[1] The survey centered on the job site characteristics youth associate with excellent or with poor community learning experiences. Being given adult responsibility was rated by youth as an important factor influencing quality of learning at job sites.

Students participating in this study took part in career exploration experiencies in at least six different sites over the year. They were then asked to write down what they actually did at a job site where they learned the most and what they did at a job site where they learned little or nothing. An independent consultant then assigned a high, moderate or low rating to their responses. The criteria applied were (a) the presumed importance to the employer if the tasks were not performed or performed incorrectly and (b) the degree of independence of thought or action required to perform the task.

Proportionately, there were twice as many high responsibility tasks listed for the

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[1]EBCE is an alternative high school program that integrates student learning experiences in the school and in the community. Three key areas are emphasized: career skills, life skills and basic skills.

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excellent learning sites and more than twice the proportion of moderate level tasks. Respondents at the poor learning sites performed almost four times the number of low responsibility tasks.

***It is evident that having responsibility is important to young people if they are to perceive a job site as a positive learning experience.***

Research conducted by Diane Hedin at the University of Minnesota found a "sense of social and personal responsibility" to be one of five factors that make youth more employable. These studies validated how important it is that youth be given responsibility. More information was needed, however, on how educators and employers can help young people develop this trait. So staff from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) designed a more focused study aimed at answering the following specific questions:

- What are the perceptions of youth, educators and employers about the meaning of responsibility?
- How important is it to youth that they be given adult responsibility?
- What resonsibilities do students have at school, home and at worksites?
- What elements of the school contribute to or reduce the opportunity for young people to demonstrate responsible behavior?
- What elements of the workplace contribute to or reduce the opportunity for young people to demonstrate responsible behavior?
- In what ways can school and workplace settings be modified to enhance opportunities for responsible behavior?

The study was conducted in May, 1982 at a suburban high school in Oregon. Data were gathered through face-to-face interviews.

Program staff from a Cooperative Work Experience (CWE) Program and an Experience-Based Career Education (EBCE) Program were asked to nominate five male and five female students they judged to be high in responsibility and five male and female students judged to be low in responsibility. The NWREL interviewers were not told how students were judged to avoid biasing the interviews. Staff in each of the programs were interviewed, as well as a cross-section of six nonprogram staff at the high school. In addition, nine employers associated with CWE and nine with EBCE were interviewed. The employers were selected from a diversity of occupational fields, representing a balance of blue and white collar workers. A total of 40 students, 15 teachers and 18 employers were interviewed. Student interviews took about 20 minutes; staff and employer interviews lasted from 20 to 40 minutes. Notes were taken during interviews and rewritten later.

## Some Answers We Found

### THE MEANING OF RESPONSIBILITY

#### To Students

Rather than giving an an abstract definition of responsibility, students were requested to think of a friend whom they felt was very responsible. They were then asked "What does this person do that makes you consider him/her responsible?"

Their responses overwhelmingly centered on the qualities of:

- reliability
- trustworthiness
- dependability

Examples included persons who complete tasks, keep obligations, who are responsible to their friends, and "never let you down." Students also mentioned frequently that a responsible person is one who is "on time," acts independent, and does well in school--i.e., gets good grades, completes assignments, is involved in school activities and understands the importance of education.

Qualities of irresponsible persons are generally reported by students as the opposite of the qualities of responsible ones. Thus, irresponsible persons are described as unreliable, not doing what they say they will do, lacking a sense of commitment and being willing to lie. Further, they are not punctual with school, work or friends. Another characteristic frequently mentioned was sloppiness or "goofing off." Students also stated that irresponsible students are ones who "don't care for themselves or for others," who are inconsiderate, disrespectful of others' possessions, and who take advantage of others.

### To Teachers

Teachers were asked what the idea of a responsible student meant to them and what student behaviors would illustrate this. Their most prevalent responses indicated that responsible students were those who:

- used time well
- appeared on time at the workplace
- met scheduled appointments

Other frequent responses were being accountable and displaying a positive or good attitude. Individual responses included: showing maturity, being trustworthy, being cooperative, developing a "we" spirit, being prepared for work, conforming to program standards and showing loyalty to program/job site.

### To Employers

Employers' ideas of a responsible worker centered on three key concepts:

- being on time
- having self-initiative
- showing loyalty to the company or organization.

Employers mentioned "being on time" more frequently than anything else in response to this question. It is readily apparent that whatever else the idea of responsibility means, it is closely associated in employers' minds with appearing for work punctually.

Mentioned nearly as frequently were a cluster of responses that dealt with the importance of taking responsibility for one's own actions, showing initiative and displaying independence and self-motivation.

Employers also repeatedly cited showing interest, commitment and loyalty to the company or organization for which the student is working.

Across the three groups the idea of showing up on time seemed to be a particularly important aspect of responsibility. Being dependable and independent and showing commitment were also important dimensions mentioned.

## Becoming More Responsible: What Helps

Students were asked where they felt they got the greatest help in becoming a responsible person and why.

***The greatest help was perceived to come from home, work and school, in that order.***

Parental example was cited most frequently as the best help students received in becoming responsible persons. Students stated, for example, that parents let them take responsibility for their own actions, let them learn by trial and error, and show that they trust them and respect their decisions. Restricting students' activities when they act irresponsibly and challenging them to take on more responsibility also help.

Work was also perceived as an important setting for learning responsibility. Specifically, being at a worksite gave students the opportunity to be responsible, to work independently and to feel that they're "worth something." Being trusted, having rules to follow, having to complete specific tasks and teaching and supervising others were also seen as ways to develop responsibility.

At school some students felt they were helped to become more responsible by being expected to be on time and to do homework. Several mentioned that EBCE

staff helped them by "trusting me and not always being on my back," giving students freedom, and expecting that the work will be complete.

Students were asked what other experiences helped make them responsible. A paid job, upkeep of a car and loan payments were mentioned by several students. Other experiences cited were working as a lifeguard, taking a wilderness survival class, living on one's own and supporting oneself, experiencing family tragedies, getting peer pressure from academically-oriented friends, and taking responsibility for the physical safety of self and others acquired through military service.

### The Role of the Home

Students, staff and employers all stressed the importance of the home in helping develop responsibility in youth.

Staff felt the family has a critical role to play because the major contact occurs in the family. The family also sets the values while the school merely reinforces them. Many of their responses indicated their belief that the family should provide children with:

- a basic orientation to rules and standards
- an understanding of the need for them
- the consequences of violating them

The family should also provide the structure, discipline and reward system within which standards can be maintained and reinforced.

A few staff were surprisingly skeptical of the role that the family could play. One response was that "if parents haven't helped by the time kids are teenagers, it would be best for them to stay out of the way and let the schools have a fresh start." Another staff member called attention to parents who lie and cover up for their children.

In spite of the skepticism, however, staff members responded most frequently that the family is the most responsible unit in helping young people develop responsible behaviors.

Appropriate roles employers felt a family should play may be clustered into two areas:

- Families should teach discipline and help children learn how to carry out tasks responsibly
- Families should pay more attention to children

Within the first area, employers felt families should give children housework responsibilities, teach care of equipment and respect for property and other persons. Families should also administer discipline and say "no" more often.

Within the second area, employers felt families need to pay more attention to their children, spend time with them, communicate with them and show love, care and concern.

Employers also felt that families need to teach young people that they are in control of their own lives and should therefore plan them. Families should also set a responsible example for youth, teach the importance of education, and teach what is and is not acceptable in daily life.

### The Role of the School

Both employers and teachers felt strongly that schools play an important role in helping young people develop a sense of responsibility.

Employers felt schools should:

- o teach students about expectations in the world of business
- o provide ways for students to be exposed to business
- o work as closely as possible with employers

Staff reported unanimously that schools should be working to help students develop responsible behavior. However, they described a number of limitations to what schools could do. Staff were receptive to

the ideas that it is appropriate to model responsible behavior and that high school students are not yet adults. At the same time they warned that although schools can be a good place to learn responsibility, they can't teach it. Staff also warned that the development of responsibility is continuous, and to expect high schools to be able to easily change patterns that had already emerged would be unreasonable.

Specific things that staff thought their high school should be doing clustered around four main areas:

- infusing the concept of responsibility into classes
- developing and/or promoting school policies that are consistent with the concept of responsibility
- encouraging extracurricular activities as ways of developing responsibility
- improving the climate of the school by having higher expectations of students

Staff also mentioned conducting teacher inservice, weeding out insensitive staff, and offering counseling as additional ways to improve the school's ability to help young people become more responsible.

Staff found numerous examples of activities in their high school that support the development of responsibility including an Experience-Based Career Education Program. Infusing concepts in classes and extracurricular activities were also mentioned. Only a few examples were provided in the area of school policies or improving the school climate such as the formation of a high school committee on student responsibility.

Student participation in various extracurricular activities such as sports and clubs was mentioned frequently as ways to develop responsibility and leadership. Extracurricular activities were considered effective because students choose to participate and recognize the need to be there on time for practice, workouts, etc. Participation was felt to teach young people discipline, consistency, dependability and the need to meet group criteria. Staff illustrated this point by mentioning incidents where planning for group activities helped students learn from their failures as well as from their successes. Competition through extracurricular activities was described as allowing pressure for excellence to exist when it is otherwise not encouraged in school. However, one teacher expressed concern about overemphasizing extracurricular activities to the detriment of school work.

Teachers felt there were some unfulfilled needs in the high school regarding the development of responsibility. Chief among these were:

- the need for greater consistency in discipline
- the need for stronger expectations regarding student attendance

Other perceived barriers to the development of responsibilty in youth were: lack of adequate time for one-to-one teacher/student contact, large class size, pressure from the community and parents toward a more lenient discipline code, inadequate training of some teachers to adapt to different students, lack of an individualized curriculum and limited opportunities for rewarding responsible behavior in this way.

One teacher summarized the high school environment in this way:

> "Kids are given many <u>opportunities</u> to exercise responsibility in high school but not the <u>help</u> needed. Therefore, the less mature students don't take advantage of the opportunity."

In contrast to the structure of the regular school curriculum, the EBCE program was seen as providing a much more individualized environment. This program was seen to help students develop responsibility by:

- giving students more responsibilities

- rewarding the students with more freedom if they fulfill responsibilities
- using individualized projects
- implementing a well-understood student accountability program

In general, responses provided by staff seem to support the contention that the high school setting provides many varied opportunities for developing responsibility on the part of students. However, there seems to be a lack of clear policy and direction regarding how the school should foster the development of responsibility.

### The Role of the Workplace

School staff and employers were both asked what they felt employers should be doing to help youth develop greater responsibility. Staff felt that employers had a significant role to play. Their responses clustered into eight general categories: expectations, punctuality, challenges, standards and values, information about work, respect, context, and helping students learn.

Staff also felt that employers should:

- communicate information about the workplace to youth
- stress the importance of punctuality
- help youth become aware of standards and values in the workplace
- provide constant challenges

Employers described a variety of factors occurring at their job sites that could help students develop a greater sense of responsibility. These factors have been divided into two categories.

First was the opportunity available to students to observe the consequences of different behaviors in the work place. Observing the firing of unreliable employees and the rewarding of good performance is an example of this category.

The second type of factor might be described as motivational. It has to do with the fact that being given responsibility develops the sense of responsibility. Examples cited by employers included having the life of a pet depend on students, and working with young children who look up to them and have expectations for them.

While employers expressed the notion that expectations of responsibility generally result in a higher performance level, they often proceeded very cautiously in giving students increased responsibility. Many believed students must demonstrate acceptable maturity before being given increased responsibilities.

Factors limiting the development of a sense of responsibility were mainly external in nature: certification requirements, the narrow perspective implicit in part-time work, physical strength requirements, agency policies, and insurance requirements.

Employers had suggestions to share with other employers for ways to help young people develop a greater sense of responsibility. These generally related to establishing positive working relationships with students such as: taking a personal interest in and trusting students, working closely together, setting forth expectations clearly, clarifying the purpose of the job, setting a good example, providing formal reviews, giving daily feedback, providing job satisfaction, keeping communications open, and letting students know that the organization relies on them.

Employers also mentioned again the notion that students should:

- be given challenges
- be allowed to assume responsibilities and use their own initiative, and
- be started on easy tasks and moved up to harder ones.

## Staff and Student Ratings

Within the CWE and the EBCE programs, half of the students selected by their teachers were nominated as demonstrating high responsibility and the other half as demonstrating low responsibility. Each of the 40 students was also asked to rate themselves on a responsibility scale from 1 to 10. Students rated themselves in terms of their self-perceived level of responsibility in a regular classroom setting while in the CWE or EBCE program, and at jobsites arranged through their program. On the whole, students rated themselves as most responsible while at job sites, somewhat lower while in the CWE or EBCE program at school and lowest in their regular classroom setting.

The staff ratings of student responsibility did not differ significantly by the student's sex or grade point average. Staff ratings correlated significantly (.48 correlation) with the students' self ratings while at the job site but not with their self ratings in the classroom or CWE/EBCE program. Students' grade point average correlated significantly (.36) with their self ratings on responsibility while in the classroom but not with their ratings at employer sites or in the CWE/EBCE program.

This suggests that academic ability is a key factor in classroom behavior but not in behavior outside of the classroom. There were no significant differences in self ratings or responsibility between males and females or between students in EBCE and those in CWE.

## The Meaning of Responsibility: A Consensus

A point of common agreement among youth, employers and staff is that responsibility involves being where you are supposed to be on time.

Employers and students in work-related programs often added the related idea of calling in if you are going to be late or absent. This practice is one that is developed through participation in EBCE and CWE programs but is seldom done in the regular high school program.

### Trust

One aspect of responsibility more frequently discussed by youth and employers than by teachers is the importance of trust in building a responsible relationship.

Youth want to be trusted by adults. At the same time, employers tend to give young people more responsible assignments only if they feel they can trust them. Although educators are well aware of the need for their students to demonstrate employment competency at worksites, little seems to be done to help students recognize the importance of communicating trustworthiness.

In short, a student who can demonstrate a high level of trustworthiness and moderate competency to an employer is likely to receive greater opportunities for engaging in more responsible tasks than one who displays high task competency but only moderate trustworthiness. The paradox is that both educators and employers need to be willing to take risks. They need to give young people more challenging tasks before youth are able to really demonstrate their ability to handle more responsible positions. Many young people in our study are asking for this opportunity.

### Reality

In reflecting on the perceptions of responsibility brought to light by this study, it is essential to keep in mind the reality of the context. Students in this study were not full-time employees performing critical jobs. They were involved at employer sites on a short-term exploration or job development basis. Employers were well aware of this. Consequently, the amount of responsibility generally given to students was limited.

Those employers who were willing to risk having students engage in tasks demanding greater responsibility generally discovered that young people can often accomplish much more than adults imagine. In the words of one student:

"I behaved responsibly at my jobsite because they trusted me and expected me to be responsible."

## Implications for Action

Staff in schools and training programs need to remember that reponsibility will remain at a low level unless young people are provided opportunities to make decisions and design plans to carry them out. Only in that way can youth be responsible for the consequences of their decisions and actions. These opportunities for decision making need to begin in elementary school and expand as young people demonstrate greater maturity.

Not all young people have the same opportunities at jobsites to take on responsible tasks. Staff and parents need to help young people become aware of opportunities in their lives to grow in responsibility whether it be through caring for their younger brothers and sisters at home, taking on leadership roles in extracurricular activities at school, participating in church or community groups, or taking possible risks among their peers by participating actively in the classroom or work setting. Employers need to communicate their expectations more clearly to young people at their worksite and be willing to gamble that many youth will rise to the challenge of performing well on more demanding tasks. They should also let young people know that they will be given more responsible assignments after they first demonstrate competency on more routine tasks.

Boards of Education, private industry councils, and other policy making groups need to ensure that any new work training program proposals developed have provisions built in for providing young people with opportunities to make decisions, assume responsible roles and be held accountable for their performance.

High schools of today often manage youth as if they expect them not to be responsible. For example, the same group control arrangements are used for older youth that were designed for children. Teachers and administrators need to rethink how freedom and accountability can be given to high school students to help them plan their own learning and manage their time.

### *Editor's Note*

*The research findings presented in this issue grew out of a NWREL Education and Work Program contract with the National Institute of Education (NIE). The Ideas for Action issues provide a vehicle for sharing these findings in nontechnical language with educators, employers, parents and others interested in helping young people grow into mature adults. The research discussed in this issue was designed and conducted by Tom Owens with the assistance of various people. Andrea Hunter and Carolyn Cohen assisted in conducting student and employer interviews. Greg Druian provided help in summarizing the data and in identifying useful trends. Chris Landry provided tabulation of some data and word processing of this issue and Kathryn Morimitsu edited the text. Ron Bucknam of the NIE staff and David Moore from New York University provided helpful critique of the design and draft copies of the interview guides.*

**Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory**
**300 S.W. Sixth Avenue**
**Portland, Oregon 97204**

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